



Poetry of Anxiety and Extremity in the Writings of the Indian English Women Poets

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ABSTRACT: *There is always the feeling of anxiety and extremity, rootlessness, of loss of belonging and the search for one's self and one's roots in the writing of the Indian English women poets. It is present at the core of the poet's being, this sense of alienation, the strange and unfamiliar stirrings of the soul, a craving for affiliation and strange nomadic gypsy thoughts. To fight for the dignity and true emancipation of women is the most difficult task especially because it involves values and attitudes that are deep rooted not only in the minds of men but also in the consciousness of women. These prominent English female poets have done justice to the poetry of anxiety and extremity, which indeed is laudable.*

Keywords: Poetry of Anxiety and Extremity; Indian English Women Poets

The poetry of women poets after the 1960s is a social, literary and linguistic document on feminism, postmodernism and post colonialism. Woven through the tapestry of Indo- English poetry is a thread of alienation, now and then through the warp and the woof it raises its head starting from *Toru Dutt* right down to *Kamala Das, Gauri Deshpande, Mamta Kalia, Eunice de Souza, Imtiaz Dharker, Mukta Sambrani, Sujata Bhatt, Lakshmi Kannan, Tara Patel, Melanie Silgado, Debjani Chatterjee, Menka Shivadasani, Suniti Namjoshi and Charmayne D'souza*. Individual poets deal with them differently. Some subdue it beneath the weight of their lyrical outpourings, whilst within others it surfaces every now and then causing restlessness, a yearning, sentimental and laced with nostalgia. In others, it erupts a rootlessness, which totally cripples the creative impulse.

Oft like a sad imprisoned bird I sigh
To leave this land, thou mine own land it be
for I have dreamed
Of climes more bright and free.

Though limited by a lack of tradition and restricted in their expression by the burden of a foreign language, the poets of the age were the forerunners of a movement that reached its full development in the poetry of these women poetesses. In this article an endeavor will be made to view the chosen poets from a particular angle of extreme poetry written under the Dures of tense anxiety and extremity syndrome.

Frustrations, anguish and dejection all combined to create turmoil in the poet's mind. This

churning of emotions, reverberations of innermost thoughts and feelings and the resultant antagonism creates in the poets mind a feeling of alienation. She feels like a nomad not knowing her roots and her belongings. Lost in a haze she does not know which path to take. To add to this the poet faces some major negative forces, those of regionalism, groupism and parochialism and wages a relentless struggle against these. The poets rebel and launch a cultural crusade against age-old doubts and taboos, thus giving it much needed dimension and dignity. There has always been a confessional tradition in modern Indian poetry. **Kamala Das** is highly emotive and self revelatory. varied conflicting emotions chase each other within her mind, but she chooses to lay bare her anguish with an experimentation that is not only self revelatory but opens up uncharted vistas whose avenues are explored by later poets.

Serenity, love and security are the will-of-the-wiz Das had been chasing. They prove elusive and she is deprived of tenderness and warmth. Das displays a lot of self-probing, questionings, targets her own tortured psyche, and finds the soul's therapy in confession. For her, writing becomes a "compulsion neurosis". Frustration and anguish, which pour forth from her, become a source of her muse. Kamala Das's poetry is criss - crossed by soul searching, self-analysis, introspection and of looking deep into oneself. She bares her soul and her emotions. Her innermost thoughts form the crux of her poetry. Pain gives her words movement, a velocity to speak, to live in her own way. Feroza Jussawala finds Das's uninhibited self expose as 'concerned almost entirely with her self, her self as woman, the feminine sensibility and her self'.

Things that came from her pen were something new, as no woman writer had ever before written with such power and honesty. Her poetry constitutes not just a compelling expression of personal experiences and a forceful subjective voice, but more importantly, a phenomenon unlike any other in Indian English poetry. She is the first woman poet to crack the mould, and establish an attitude and view point the Indian readers were quite unfamiliar with:

I wore a shirt and my brother's trousers
Cut my hair shorts ignored my woman
liners.
For such voices".



She was joined after few hesitations by **Mamta Kalia, Eunice de Souza, Margaret Chatterjee, Gauri Deshpande** and a whole generation of younger poets to establish an image of woman totally unencumbered by the conventional falsifying colours.

This was not a personal matter but a whole generation's hangs of birth, not an individualistic attitudinizing but a painful transformation coming over the feminine consciousness. **Eunice de Souza's** poetry is about unhappy childhood experiences, which are part of the community in form and inspire much of her poetry. Her poems embody an acute consciousness of the problems faced by women, expressed in ironic statements and striking images. Many of her poems are concerned with different aspects of male domination and female oppression, anxiety and extremities of life. Eunice de Souza's poems have brevity, unexpectedness and urgency of telegrams.

While de Souza is still best known for those quietly angry yet somehow compassionate portraits of the society in which she was raised, her writing has moved on. De Beauvoir explains this otherness in these words, "The situation of woman is that she -a free and autonomous being like all creatures nevertheless finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the other".

The Otherness leads to alienation, marginalization and trivialization of woman and makes her revolt against the politics of patriarchy. The struggle against traditional values and structures is clearly suggested in the poem 'For Who wonders if I Get Much Joy Out of Life':

In fact I do
I contemplate, with certain
Grim satisfaction
Dynamic men who sell better butter

The Catholic character delineated in de Souza's poems constitutes evil as this evil entails denial of freedom. The deep sense of pain and loss and the very absence of God make her poetry an 'act of violence'.

Sujata Bhatt reminds one of Salman Rushdie who said that literature has little or nothing to do with a writer's home address (New York).

The Indian Diaspora is the largest with around 20 million Indians settled in different parts of the world. These diasporic communities live in multicultural environments. It is a process of re-constructing the self in a new surrounding. Women as a part of the cultural ethos cannot escape the gendered roles of passivity, acceptance and subservience. Whether in India or the west they need to make choices, which might prove to be a difficult task.

Sujata Bhatt's journey originates from her loneliness and restlessness. The poem 'The Multicultural Poem' may be read as a statement of her poetic predicament:

The multicultural poem does not expect
The reader to understand anything.

Suniti Nanjoshi is firmly committed to the belief-stretched to extreme urgency that change is the law of life. She attacks stereotypes, as she believes that rigidity of any kind is against evolutionary change. What goes parallel in her work is her preoccupation with societal norms and systems that inherently tend to suppress the female. Her paradoxical attitude to the nature of life arrests her from attributing any fixed meanings to the phenomena of existence. The poem 'When I die I might be Rich' is a rather cosmic statement on the speculation of the poet's own death:

When I die, I might be rich.

A lawyer might come to my stately home

In addition, make an inventory, a collection of records,

The act of leaving home and settling elsewhere shapes both the writer's sensibility and the text. In this context, Chelva Kanaganayakam observes, "For writers who have not chosen to leave, the epistemology of home is hardly ever problematic".

In a dialogue with Pratibha Parmar, she says that her consciousness is a "lesbian feminist one and an Indian one in some curious way..... now feminists in their own writing must necessarily transform the power balance and write for a female readership, allowing men to eavesdrop if they chose to". When asked: "What does it mean to be a lesbian?" she replied: "What does it mean to be human?" It is apparent that Nanjoshi is concerned with deconstructing a literary canon and the ontology that insisted on privileging patriarchy.

As in the case of Kamala Das as a poet, it is a journey from innocence to experience. In case of **Imtiaz Dharker**, it is the journey from subordination to freedom. For her, writing poetry is an act of purgation, an act of liberation from the patriarchal hegemony. Imtiaz Dharker may not be a radical progressive; she is definitely the forerunner of protest poetry.

Imtiaz Dharker's poems are not mere flat statements on the female condition. They pose some basic questions such as- are women capable of facing the contradictions within themselves. With enlightenment and education, women will grow to the reality of their existence. Freethinking will lead them to positions of free thought and action. The voice of woman cannot be muffled.



Melanie Silgado's poems include stressful states of consciousness. Most of them are confessional and emotional. She merges in these poems a poet of volatile, neurotic emotions, with poems unexpectedly changing direction and gaining effect from inner conflicts, contrasts, ironies and extremes.

The colloquial rhythms of these lines suggest the intensity of emotional involvement. This is an extension of Mamta Kalia's attitude and registers of speech. Mamta Kalia in her poem 'Tribute to Papa' raises voice of protest against patriarchy and the world that inhibits. Again, father haunts:

You suspect I am having a love affair
these days,

Nevertheless, you are too shy to have it
confirmed.

These lines are in confessional mode less fierce in tone than found in Sylvia Plath. What the Indian women poets share with Sylvia Plath is the knack of converting private suffering into public sorrows, and at the same time, converting public sorrows into personal pain. Compassion, however, lies at the root of all these poets. For example, Sylvia Plath feels that the pain in her heart is akin to the public sufferings experienced by the Jews at the hand of the Nazis and she says, "I think I may well be a Jew" (Daddy). And hearing about the victims of Hiroshima, she feels their pain on the personal level. This becomes possible when these poets lose self-consciousness enough to project personal experience with ease in poetry. They fuse internal preoccupation with outer perception and discard restraint in favor of freer style.

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These poets evoke the idea of anti-poetry, i.e. they rebel against conventions, formality, diction, rhythms and traditions of poetry. The Chilean poet and physicist, Nicanor Parra, author of anti-poems asserts, "The time has come to bring this ritual up-to-date.... You can do anything in poetry" the wit, irony, attitude of the poets under discussion is relaxed. Mamta Kalia observes that in Allahabad she was "primarily affected by the very ordinary life style of extraordinary intellectuals, their critical concepts and concerns". Such poems are not literary artifacts. They are therapeutic means to gain control over private neurosis-anxieties, fears, anguish, guilt, desire and individual mess caused by parental conflicts. Eunice de Souza's poem 'Forgive Me, Mother' makes the point clear:

It was kill or die.

And you got me anyway:

The blood congeals at lover's touch

The guts dissolve in shit.

Silgado's poetic consciousness is eventually shaped by a sense of horror, depression, insecurity, self-humiliation and emotions that failed. A sense of inadequacy overpowers.

Their poetry does not romanticize the emotion of love in a 'lady-like' language. In Bruce King's words, "The earlier generation of women seems to feel that the problems of life could be solved through a man's love... there are ironic and satiric pieces on the relationship between men and women and on male predations and feelings of dominance... The women seem to be on their own; if they make a mess of their lives it is their mess and not the fault of a husband or lover". But this must be qualified. These poets in particular reveal a world filled with anxieties.